

## BYZANTIUM AND SASANIAN IRAN

Report on the Dumbarton Oaks Symposium of 1970

RICHARD N. FRYE

RELATIONS between the Sasanian and Byzantine empires, respective heirs of the Achaemenids and the Romans, were the subject of the Symposium. Continuity with the past was a hallmark of both empires, and the speakers' interesting remarks, rather than adding new perspectives, substantiated this continuity. The change in both empires, especially in relation to each other, after the time of Justinian (527-65) and Chosroes Anushirvan (531-79) reflected a better knowledge and understanding of the adversary, and more subtle means of competition and diplomacy.

Andrew Alföldi opened the Symposium with a discussion of the idea of "The *Kosmokrator* in Rome, Byzantium, and Persia." Tracing the development of a solar theology and astral symbolism in Iran from the Achaemenids to the Sasanians, Professor Alföldi showed a parallel development in Greece and Rome. The star and crescent on Sasanian coins and the symbol of the rising star of the savior-emperor in the Roman Empire were only two features of ancient beliefs persisting in both empires. Both the Sasanian great king and the Byzantine emperor thought of themselves as *kosmokrators*, and thus as antagonistic twins.

In his paper on "Irano-Byzantine Commercial and Diplomatic Rivalry," a considerably condensed version of which is presented in the present volume, Richard Frye indicated that the epic view of history which the Sasanians held distinguished them from their Byzantine opponents, who had read Herodotus and knew about the past of Rome. Nonetheless, the two empires respected each other, but each sought to gain supremacy over the other in diplomacy and trade. The Byzantines attempted to bypass the Persians on the road to India in the south by alliances with Ethiopian and other powers. Likewise, in the north Byzantine and Sasanian commercial rivalry was both widespread and important,

as witnessed by the silver vessels and coins found in Russia.

Philip Grierson spoke on "Byzantine and Sasanian Coinages" and outlined the issues of a relatively stable Sasanian silver coinage, having a high silver content, throughout the life of the Sasanian Empire. The Byzantine coinage, primarily gold and copper, was, on the other hand, comparatively unstable, with the gold coinage changing in standards. There was little interchange between the two systems—the monometalism of the Sasanids' silver and the gold and copper of the Romans, which was followed by the Byzantines.

Elias J. Bickerman, speaking on "Rulers and Ruled in the Later Roman Empire and in Sasanian Persia," described the continuity of Roman traditions in Byzantium as seen in the use of the Latin language by the army until Justinian and on coins until Heraclius. Yet, after Justinian there was in Byzantium a return to classical Greece, parallel to a return to a mythical, epic past in Sasanian Persia. Byzantium had a democratic legacy, whereas the Sasanians became more rigidly fixed in their class structure and in the principle of legitimate succession to the throne. The size of both empires engendered feelings of estrangement between the rulers and the ruled. Cities opted for autonomy while the countryside was left undefended in the breakdown of government following the growth of lack of confidence. The centralized power of each Empire failed to protect the provinces in the face of the Arab onslaught.

Richard Ettinghausen spoke on "The Sasanian Encounter with Byzantine Art," and of how both styles were synthesized in Islamic art. He illustrated three types of borrowings. First were transfer borrowings, in which no details were essentially changed; this was illustrated by Dionysiac motifs on silver bowls and other objects from both East and West. Second were the borrowings with adaptations in form

and meaning; illustrated by a Sasanian silver plate, now at the Metropolitan Museum, on which the Dioscuri, or heavenly twins, are shown holding Pegasus while he drinks from a well. Third were the borrowings with value appreciation rather than depreciation. This was illustrated by the excavations of the Umayyad site Khirbat al Mafjar, dating from the time of the Caliph Hisham (724-43), where the traditional baths became a reception hall, decorated with a synthesis of Byzantine and Sasanian art motifs, in which the lord of the place held his banquets and receptions.

A. D. H. Bivar, in his talk on "Byzantine and Sasanian Cavalry Tactics and Equipment on the Euphrates Frontier," which is published in the present volume, surveyed the military scene in both empires. He discussed the increase in the importance of cavalry at the end of the fourth and the fifth centuries A.D. and the use of the lance rather than the bow and arrow. The problem of the corresponding increase in weight and coverage of the armor was met by the development of chain armor. During the Hunnic invasions the mounted archer with compound bow returned to the scene, and this necessitated new tactics on both the Byzantine and the Sasanian sides. As a result, a kind of balance of military power evolved by the seventh century.

Averil Cameron spoke on "Knowledge of Iranian Affairs at Byzantium—Agathius," indicating that the court at Constantinople was well informed about Sasanian affairs and that the history of the various rulers was known, whereas information about pre-Sasanian times reflected the unhistorical nature of Persian annals. Agathias, although writing for an audience in Constantinople, tried too often to give new information on Persia, but in this he was limited by his Persian sources.

Irfan Shahid, speaking on "The Iranian Factor in Byzantium during the Reign of Heraclius," printed in the present volume, concentrated on the assumption of the title of *βασιλεύς* by Heraclius in 629. He showed that this was done because of the Armenian origin of Heraclius, who revived an Armenian concept of a Christian king and rejected the pagan titles which had been used previously.

Shortly before the Symposium, its director learned of the death of Nina Pigulevskaja. She was to have spoken on "Byzantine and Sasanian Legal Codes."

The problems raised by the Symposium are manifold, but, with the undertaking of new archaeological excavations and with more young people devoting themselves to the study of it, this rarely explored area of history will undoubtedly surrender some of its secrets.